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Convergences and Divergences: The Lives of Swami Abhishiktananda and Raimundo Panikkar¹

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TODAY the field of Hindu-Christian studies is burgeoning with both advanced scholars and freshly minted PhDs. However, during most of the twentieth century it was rare for a Christian thinker to take non-Christian religions seriously as a meaningful area of theological inquiry. Those who did generally limited themselves to theorizing about these religions in the abstract, rather than in engaging with living members of these religions. Five outstanding exceptions were Jules Monchanin, Swami Abhishiktananda, Raimundo Panikkar, Francis Acharya, and Bede Griffiths, all of whom were Catholic priests who settled in India over a sixteen year time period, from 1939 to 1955. There are a multitude of studies of these men, but only a small proportion of these examine them comparatively. This is ironic, for their lives were intertwined.

Abhishiktananda (Fr. Henri Le Saux 1910-1973) first came to India in 1948 to establish with Monchanin a Benedictine monastery which would follow an Indian lifestyle and the regulations of Hindu monasticism. Panikkar (1918-2010) had a growing reputation in Europe as a philosopher when he came to India in 1954 and studied Hindu philosophy at Banaras Hindu University. The two priests met in Pune, where Abhishiktananda was giving a seminar on Gregorian chant at the Pontifical Seminary in 1957. They discussed theology “on the road, in

the sun, squeezed together in buses, in the restaurant, as well as sitting in a room.”² Until Abhishiktananda’s death in 1973 they had a deep friendship, and Panikkar stated that they were “like brothers.”³ Although there were deep bonds between the two men there were also significant differences in their approaches to Hinduism, and these differences can be seen in terms of “acosmic” aims on Abhishiktananda’s part and synthetic aims and “cosmotheandricism” on Panikkar’s part.

Spiritual Formation in Europe

Swami Abhishiktananda was born in Brittany, France. He was raised in a pious Catholic environment, where the “times and seasons” in the Le Saux family “were marked by the great festivals of the Church and by the missions which were periodically held in the parish church.”⁴ Deeply shaped by this upbringing, Abhishiktananda entered the minor seminary, studying for the priesthood, at age eleven. Later, at age nineteen, influenced by the death of a friend who had resolved to become a Benedictine monk, he joined St. Anne’s Abby in Kergonan.

Benedictine monasticism consists of communal living under the direction of an abbot or spiritual father. The monk must mortify his

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self-will by strict obedience to the abbot and by renouncing all personal possessions, holding everything in common with the community. In this way the monk participates in Christ's immolation of his will in his sacrifice on the cross. As a young man about to enter the monastery Abhishiktananda reflected on the trials of this lifestyle: "I like to have things of my own, to have things which in some sense complete my 'I', but in the monastery I have to feel that none of the things that I use belongs to me . . . And then to be condemned to avoid human society, to be for ever secluded within extremely narrow limits, to pass a lifetime of which every day is identical."⁵ This lifestyle seemed "horrible and futile" to him, but he also felt "driven by something which does not allow me to draw back or turn aside, and compels me, almost in spite of myself, to throw myself into the unknown."⁶

Benedictine monasticism has had different expressions in different times and places. A 1964 publication, *Benedictine Ashram*, which Abhishiktananda and Monchanin had begun writing in 1950, shows those aspects of Benedictine monasticism which were especially important to Abhishiktananda.⁷ To begin, he considered the praise of God to be the highest purpose of human life and considered Benedictine monasticism to be an institution devoted expressly to that aim.⁸ Key to this are "solitude, silence, and quietude," for activities outside the monastery, even those that are explicitly religious and or support human welfare, can interfere with this life of praise.⁹ Abhishiktananda cited approvingly a well known monastic dictum, "*Fuge, tace, quiesce*—'flee, keep silent, be quiet.'"¹⁰

A small, unpublished book, "Amour et sagesse," which Abhishiktananda wrote in 1942, also gives insight into his spiritual life.¹¹ The book is mainly a reflection on the Trinity, and he considered the significance of the Trinity to be that humans are called to share in the life of God; just as the Son shares in the life of the Father so are humans to share in this life through the Son.¹² It was unusual for a Christian to focus on the Trinity, for most are focused on the Incarnation. Trinitarian theology is a seemingly abstract area, much of it dealing with what lies

beyond space and time, whereas the Incarnation involves concrete historical realities. Indeed, Abhishiktananda had renounced human comforts in his quest for God, and even wanted to renounce human ideas of God, going straight to God beyond space and time. As he wrote in "Amour et sagesse": "No word may speak of God, all thought fails before God, all fruits, all delights are nothing before the divine beatitude. Beyond, always beyond. It is not your gifts, Lord, that I want, but yourself; it is not for the intellect to be dazzled by the Spirit which I aspire for, but it is your vision, the face to face with you, Lord."¹³

During his two decades at St. Anne's, a desire dawned in Abhishiktananda to move to India. The specifics of how this desire arose are unknown, but both Panikkar and Abhishiktananda's biographer, Stuart, wrote that he was not finding at St. Anne's the level of renunciation that he desired.¹⁴ Admiring India's ascetical traditions, he resolved to found a contemplative institution in India, and gained his abbot's permission to settle there in 1948 and in 1958 established Shantivanam Ashram, which Bede Griffiths later led.

Raimundo Panikkar was born in Barcelona in 1918.¹⁵ As is well known, his mother was a Catholic and his father a Hindu. Although his father was a Hindu he grew up in a pious Catholic environment. In fact, his childhood coincided with the rule of Primo de Rivera, whose dictatorship backed the Catholic Church, and Panikkar stated that he was "brought up in the strictest orthodoxy."¹⁶ Both Abhishiktananda and Panikkar would become priests, but whereas Abhishiktananda would emerge as a monk Panikkar would emerge as an intellectual.¹⁷

In 1940 Panikkar joined what is today a well known institution, Opus Dei, which had been founded twelve years earlier by Father Josemaría Escrivá de Balaguer. A unique institution in the Catholic Church, it stresses strict discipline and self-abnegation not in the usual context of the monastic cloister but in the arena of ordinary life. As Escrivá wrote in the 1930s, "It is not necessary to abandon one's state in the world to seek God, . . . , for every path of life can be the occasion of an encounter with Christ."¹⁸ "In that ordinary life, as we go

along through the world with our professional colleagues or coworkers . . . God our Father gives us the opportunity to exercise ourselves in all the virtues: . . . poverty, humility, obedience.”¹⁹ Panikkar was attracted to Opus Dei because he found it to be a group of people that stood out from the surrounding society, in that they took their faith very seriously, stressing self-abnegation.²⁰ Hence, Abhishiktananda and Panikkar were both living demanding lifestyles, but former in the context of a cloistered life but the latter being active in the world.

In the 1940s Panikkar became involved in the Consejo Superior de Investigaciones Científicas (Superior Council of Scientific Investigations, which exists today as a major research institution). It had been established in 1939 by Franco’s Minister of Education, Ibañez Martín, in order to restore the unity between theology and the natural sciences that had existed in the Middle Ages.²¹ The CSIC was populated with members of Opus Dei, for the goals of the two fit well together. Related to his goal of pursuing sanctity in the workplace Escrivá wrote about how all things should be integrated with Christ: “By doing with love the tasks proper to our profession or job, . . . we fulfill that apostolic task of placing Christ at the summit and in the heart of all human activities.”²²

As a member of the CSIC, Panikkar pursued these ideals assiduously. In 1944 he cofounded its official publication, *Arbor*, which is still in circulation today. He contributed an article to the first volume, “Visión de Síntesis del Universo,” which regrets the worldview of modern people, in which God, self, and the universe are generally considered in isolation from each other.²³ He argued the need of a contemporary synthesis of the three to solve the restlessness and anxiety of modern people.²⁴ In 1946 he became a priest and earned his doctorate in philosophy from the University of Madrid with the dissertation, “El Concepto de Naturaleza,” in which he attempted to integrate modern science with Aristotelian philosophy by focusing on the dynamism inherent in nature. Later, in 1958, he completed his doctorate in chemistry from the University of Madrid, with his dissertation, “Ontonomía de la Ciencia,” in

which he tried to integrate science and philosophy.²⁵

It was in 1954 that Panikkar made his first trip to India. He had become enamored with the liberal trends that were emerging in Catholic theology. This, in conjunction with the fact that he was becoming increasingly well known as a scholar, led to tension with Opus Dei. Hence, his superiors sent him to India where he would not be a source of immediate trouble for the institution. Panikkar had family roots in India, and he had a growing interest in India, as is shown by the growing frequency with which he wrote about India in his publications.²⁶ However, in spite of having a Hindu father he wrote that there was no point in his life in which he was more Western than before his trip to India, any Oriental influence from his father being at a minimum.²⁷

Encounter with Hinduism

Coming from strict Catholic backgrounds, India was somewhat of a shock to Abhishiktananda and Panikkar. A traditional teaching is that there is no salvation outside the Catholic Church. However, this teaching has been interpreted with varying degrees of rigidity and flexibility over time. For instance, although not claiming at the time that Hinduism can lead one to the heart of the Godhead, Abhishiktananda wrote with admiration in *Benedictine Ashram* in 1951 of Hinduism’s ascetical traditions, writing that they express a sincere longing for God.²⁸ Panikkar, on his part, hinted that he believed that non-Christian religions have positive values and are precursors to Christianity.²⁹ Yet, both men would undergo profound changes in their assessments of Hinduism.

The key experience for Abhishiktananda was meeting Ramana Maharishi in January 1949, within half a year of his arrival in India. He was excited to see this adept of Indian asceticism, who had some fame even in Europe at that time. Abhishiktananda reported his experience in *Secret of Arunāchala*. Sitting in the presence of the Maharishi, Abhishiktananda was impressed by the sanctity he emanated. Leaving the ashram he dreamt of Ramana all

night: "My dreams also included attempts—always in vain—to incorporate in my previous mental structures without shattering them, these powerful new experiences which my contact with the Mahārshi had brought to birth."³⁰ According to Abhishiktananda's main biographer, James Stuart these "mental structures" were the Catholic orthodoxy with which he had been raised, which did not recognize true holiness outside the Church.³¹

In the wake of these experiences and other visits to Ramana's Ashram, Abhishiktananda's involvement with Hinduism went from imitating the customs of Hindu monasticism to accepting aspects of Advaitic thought and participating in Advaitic meditation. This participation in Hinduism had thus gone far beyond what he had planned, but there were important continuities between his past in Europe and the present. For instance he had come to India seeking a more intense form of monasticism, and there he found not only lifestyles of renunciation but mental disciplines that bring one to renounce even one's sense of individuality. Speaking of both the past and his present, Abhishiktananda wrote in 1952, "Deep contacts with Hindu thought, books and people. Even before I came here, they had already made a mark on me. A hidden spiritual sympathy, this sense of Unity, of the ONE, of God at the source of my being, of the fading out of this 'ego' as soon as you penetrate into the interior of yourself so as to reach the unique 'I'."³²

Abhishiktananda attempted to integrate his new experiences with his Christian faith. His efforts involved the concept of the Trinity, and by the end of 1955 he had sketched out in his diary a theoretical formulation of the relationship between Christianity and Advaita, relying on the notion of the Trinity. He wrote that Advaita can take one deep inside oneself to where God dwells as the Son, and that the Christian *jñānī* can awaken from that experience to participate in the eternal communion between the Father and the Son at the heart of the Trinity.³³ He thereby linked Advaita and Christianity together in a "fulfillment theology." He developed his ideas further, beginning in 1962 to compose a book that was later published as *Saccidānanda: A Christian Approach to*

Advaitic Experience.³⁴

Abhishiktananda revealed his personal life in a wealth of written materials, but Panikkar revealed comparatively little about his interior life. However, a brief statement shows that he underwent disorientation, as Abhishiktananda had, but he did not point to any specific event. He wrote, "Here I am a man who has been brought up in the strictest orthodoxy, who has lived to boot in a milieu 'microdox' [accepting only traditional formulations] from every point of view. . . . This man goes forth, forsaking the land of Ur, to dwell in the land of men. . . . Instantly he finds himself confronted by a dilemma: either he must condemn everything around him as error and sin, or he must throw overboard the notions of exclusivism and monopoly that he has been told embody truth."³⁵

His ideas challenged, Panikkar turned his synthetic abilities from issues of God and science to Hinduism and Christianity. However, whereas Abhishiktananda focused on the Trinity Panikkar focused on the Incarnation of Christ, composing *The Unknown Christ of Hinduism* in the 1950s.³⁶ The main point of this short but multi-faceted work is that Jesus Christ is present and active in the Hindu religion, even if this is not acknowledged by Hindus.³⁷ The heart of the book is a commentary on the second *sūtra* of the *Brahma-Sūtras*, which refers to the "that" from which the universe originates. Panikkar reviewed the main Advaitic arguments concerning the "that" and argued that Christ and *Īśvara* play similar roles in their respective systems of mediating between the world and the ultimate Godhead.³⁸ In fact, he argued that Jesus, since he is understood in Christian faith to be fully human and fully divine, without confusion or alteration of the divine and human, is the best candidate for the "that" of the second *sūtra*, although Badarayana did not intend Christ.³⁹

Abhishiktananda and Panikkar became friends in 1957, and in 1964 there was an especially close time between them, when they made a pilgrimage to Gangotri. There they made a practical expression of their synthesis of Hinduism and Christianity by celebrating Mass at this sacred site, believing that they were thereby helping to bring Hinduism to its fulfillment in Christ.⁴⁰ Abhishiktananda

published a small account of their pilgrimage and wrote about their celebration of the Mass that “in the sacrifice of the Lamb everything had finally been brought to completion; every prayer and chant that had been prayed or sung in these places . . . , all the silence and the self-denial of the munis, had been finally gathered up.”⁴¹

Although this pilgrimage to Gangotri was a moment of deep unity between Panikkar and Abhishiktananda, a difference between them was emerging and would become very significant later on. Hinduism had opened a new chapter in Panikkar’s life, but his original synthetic interests remained. His first publication in 1944, “Visión de Síntesis del Universo,” had focused on the relationships between the world, the human being, and God. Over the decades he gradually developed this theme into the “cosmotheandric” insight that these three realities are constitutive of each other.⁴² In other words, these realities do not exclude each other; in seeking one of them one need not abandon the others. Abhishiktananda, however, was “acosmic,” enamored of monasticism and strict Advaita. This difference between him and Panikkar showed up at Gangotri as an argument over treating monasticism and the *nirguṇa* Brahman as absolutes.⁴³

The Supername and beyond Name and Form

In the years following the pilgrimage to Gangotri, Abhishiktananda steadily pursued Advaitic contemplation, spending more and more time at Uttarkashi in the Himalayas, living among Hindu ascetics. Panikkar, on the other hand, divided his time between traveling in India and teaching in the West, and his interests came to extend beyond Hinduism to Buddhism. Abhishiktananda and Panikkar led different lives, but by the early 1970s, both abandoned the theology of fulfillment that they had felt so strongly about at Gangotri.

Leaving Catholic Spain for India, Panikkar posited that Jesus Christ lies behind both Hinduism and Christianity. His next major step, expressed in a variety of essays, was to deny the finality of Jesus and to validate other ways to the

divine mystery. The context for this in a 1971 essay, “Faith and Belief,” was a hypothetical conversation with a Krishnaite, which was undoubtedly based on his experiences with Hindus. In conversation with this Krishnaite, Panikkar found that he must accept that Krishna “embodies truth,” for he sees that this man lives his life filled with faith in Krishna, and “a man can only live by truth; falsehood offers the mind no nourishment.”⁴⁴ This led Panikkar to posit that the Godhead has been at work in many times and places, not just the Judeo-Christian tradition, disclosing himself to humanity in various epiphanies.⁴⁵ The next question in the encounter between the Krishnaite and the Christian is the relative status of Krishna and Christ. Which one is the apex of God’s self-disclosure? Panikkar responded, “The question *as such* is childish, as though I were to argue that the poetry my daddy writes is better than the poetry your daddy writes (forgetting that each poem is unique for each child, and that there can be no comparing of poems).”⁴⁶

If neither Christ nor Krishna is to be accepted as supreme, how should one conceive the relationship between them? In a 1972 essay, “The Meaning of Christ’s Name,” he articulated a way. Therein he posited the idea of a “Supername” beyond all names. He analyzed various New Testament passages and argued that Jesus bears the Supername and reveals it to humanity, but that the Supername is also beyond Jesus. His main argument, popular among Christian theologians who espouse the “theocentric” position,⁴⁷ was that Jesus drew attention not to himself but to his heavenly father (1972: 216-17).⁴⁸ Being beyond Jesus, the Supername has many other carriers, like Krishna. The Supername has “has splashed on the earth in innumerable tongues.”⁴⁹

A different set of considerations led Abhishiktananda past theologies of fulfillment. His dialogue partner in this matter was not Hindu theism, as in Panikkar’s essay, “Faith and Belief,” but Advaita Vedanta. In this regard, the issue was not the apparent childishness of proclaiming a definitive epiphany but philosophical objections against it. As he realized as early as 1953, during the time period in which he took up residence in the caves of

Arunachala,

The West has taken man seriously, as well as the Earth which upholds him. Not so the East. Man is the measure of all, said the Greeks: man and things are part of being, substance. Hence, the value of dogmas, of the Incarnation, the agonizing importance of the present life. But for us Hindus, such a view of reality has no meaning. We feel too deeply the abyss between the permanent and the impermanent. . . . The Christian does not understand us when we refuse to consider Christ as the Only Incarnation. It is because we know that what is created can nowhere and in so single being *comprehendere* God. It is not to defend our position that we refuse to accept the uniqueness of a *deva-mārga*; it follows from one of the deepest demands of our philosophical and religious thought.⁵⁰

Although Advaita cuts at the roots of Christian doctrine Abhishiktananda struggled for nearly twenty years to maintain Christian orthodox belief. Advaita takes one beyond the mental level, but doctrine seems to be rooted in that level. However, the traditional idea of divine revelation is that Christian doctrine, though expressed in rational terms, originates beyond the conceptual level. By discussing that point in the 1960s in *Saccidānanda*, he believed he was giving a justification for adhering to Christian doctrine in the face of Advaita: "Even though faith is located in the intellect, it far surpasses it; and the intellect, even when enlightened by grace, is unable to comprehend its whole mystery. At the new level to which he has been brought by the Spirit, the believer can do nothing except simply surrender to this movement which is beyond his understanding."⁵¹

However, Abhishiktananda eventually dropped this defense of Christian doctrine. Just as Panikkar dropped his theology of fulfillment in a hypothetical conversation with a Krishnaita, Abhishiktananda dropped his in a hypothetical conversation with Ramana Maharishi. He realized that his defense of Christian doctrine in *Saccidānanda*, though it was meaningful to him, would not bridge Advaita and Christianity to the

extent of convincing an adept like Ramana. When people confronted Ramana with an intellectual conundrum he often informed them that they had missed the real point, that they must understand themselves, their true natures, before engaging in speculation.⁵² Abhishiktananda realized that to sway Ramana his argument would have to proceed from an Advaitic understanding of self, and realized that he was far from being able to present such an argument. As he wrote in 1969, "The tension between Vedanta and Christianity is insoluble. I tried to go beyond it in *Sagesse* [*Saccidānanda*]. The last chapter [on faith] shows that I was unable to do so. Above all, because we try to judge *experiences* conceptually, from outside. 'Who is asking the question?' Ramana would say."⁵³ Abhishiktananda thus abandoned his efforts to theological synthesize Advaita and Christianity: "The *dharmas* are contradictory to one another. Mutual dialogue between them can never be anything but superficial."⁵⁴

Abandoning hope in a theological integration of Advaita and Christianity, Abhishiktananda posited that a common, Advaitic experience lies behind all the myths and beliefs of the world's religions:

there is in all human existence, continuously present and underlying everything . . . this inner encounter with the mystery, with a mystery which is our self and its deepest truth and at the same time which transcends the self that is perceived in ordinary consciousness, so much so that we make this mystery into an *Other*, and project on a God this transcendence and interiorization of ourselves. . . .

Myth is a great collective dream. It is, like a dream, an instinctive way of living this reality. . . .

. . . Jesus the son of Mary awoke to this mystery in the impressive *mythos* of Judaism.⁵⁵

Thus, Panikkar and Abhishiktananda had arrived at a similar understanding of the ultimate reality. They concluded that a common reality, whether Advaita or the Supersame, lies behind all the diverse religions.

In spite of the similarities between their positions, a widening gulf was developing between Panikkar and Abhishiktananda. Abhishiktananda took exception to Panikkar's designation of the reality behind all religions as the "Supernature." He felt that Panikkar was attempting to hold onto names and forms, *nāmarūpa*, whereas Advaita calls one beyond them. As he wrote to a common friend, Bettina Bäumer, "I do not believe that R. (Panikkar) has yet found the implication of his 'remaining Christian', even in his 'Supernature'—I believe that at heart he is more Christian (in the current sense of the word) than he himself thinks. The experience of the Orient conducts one to such an EMPTINESS . . . –FULNESS that whatever is made of particulars is incapable of penetrating it. And what is Christianity without *nāmarūpa*[?]"⁵⁶

The issue between Abhishiktananda and Panikkar was that of acosmism and cosmotheandricism, which had earlier surfaced at Gangotri.⁵⁷ Abhishiktananda's acosmism was influencing his approach to religious diversity, for he argued that integration is to be found in the Advaitic experience beyond all differences.⁵⁸ However, by 1979, six years after Abhishiktananda's death, Panikkar would place clear emphasis on the distinctive features of the many religions, arguing that interreligious dialogue should take place in the concrete. The reason behind this assertion is that he identified the ultimate reality as the cosmotheandric mystery, and in cosmotheandricism the universal and particular are not opposed to each other but are constitutive of each other. Hence, Panikkar wrote, "The Way cannot be severed from the Goal. . . . It is not simply that there are different ways leading to the peak, but that the summit itself would collapse if all the paths disappeared. The peak is in a certain sense the result of the slopes leading to it."⁵⁹ The consequence is not that the encounter between religions should take place in a transcendent realm beyond them but rather in the concrete: "I wanted to stress that we meet not on a transcendent plane where differences matter no longer, where we are no longer in and of this World—but here in this World where we are fellow-pilgrims, where we commune in our humanness, in the *samsāric*

adventure, in our historical situation."⁶⁰

It might seem that the lessons of Abhishiktananda's life were lost on Panikkar, since he had found it impossible to fuse Advaita and Christian theology, whereas Panikkar was insisting that dialogue should happen at the level of differences. However, Panikkar expressed admiration for Abhishiktananda's failure to integrate, writing that "his failure proved to be his great success."⁶¹ He believed the lesson to be learned from this is that comprehensive, universal theories of religion are impossible to formulate. In place of a universal theory Panikkar advanced the "imparative method" or "diatopical hermeneutics" in the 1980s. Imparative method is

the effort at learning from the other and the attitude of allowing our own convictions to be fecundated by the insights of the other. . . . In these dialogues we do not come up with great universal theories, but with a deepened mutual understanding among, say, . . . Lutheranism and Shī'ah Islam. . . . These mutual studies, relationships, and dialogues change both the opinion of the one partner and the interpretation of the other. Religions change through these contacts; they borrow from each other and also reinforce their respective standpoints, but with less naivety.⁶²

Conclusion

Abhishiktananda and Panikkar underwent incredible transformations in their lives. They both went from religiously strict and homogenous backgrounds to experiencing India's interreligious tapestry. Abhishiktananda, on his part, went from being a Benedictine monk in Europe to living as a Hindu ascetic and gaining a respect among some Hindus that lasts even today. Panikkar went from being a weighty intellectual in one of the twentieth century's theologically conservative movements in the Catholic Church, Opus Dei, to moving freely among a wide variety of world views, including Hindu, Buddhist, secular, and a variety of Catholic philosophies and theologies.

In spite of these transformations, each man

bore the imprint of his earlier years in Europe, impacting each throughout his days. As a child in the seminary in the 1920s and later as a young adult in a monastery in the 1930s, Abhishiktananda underwent great self-denial, and in certain ways his life as a Hindu ascetic was an extension and intensification of that self-denial. Further, although the Christian and Advaitic belief systems are quite different, he experienced Advaitic mental disciplines as an extension of the Benedictine lifestyle, which requires one to uproot one's self-will. In fact, Panikkar pointed out that Abhishiktananda's true loyalty was not so much either to Christianity or to Advaita but to acosmism, to a monasticism which "seeks to break all boundaries, the limitations of the body, matter, and mind, as well as of the spirit: it aspires to transcend the human condition."⁶³ Finally, Abhishiktananda's resolution to the problem of Advaita and Christianity, which was to transcend all conceptualizations, going straight to the mystery of what he believed to be God, reflects a theme of his first theological writing in 1942, "Amour et sagesse." Therein he expressed a desire to go beyond all things, even thoughts of God, to God himself.⁶⁴ Hence, throughout his life Abhishiktananda pursued a contemplative surrender to the Godhead, but did so in his last twenty years in a way he had never envisaged as a monk in Europe.

While acosmism was a main theme of Abhishiktananda's life, synthesis was of Panikkar's. As an intellectual in Opus Dei and the CSIC in the 1940s, Panikkar was attempting to reassert the place of God in human life by integrating God and science, which was the topic of his first two doctoral dissertations. However, in the 1950s he shifted the focus of his synthetic efforts to Christianity and Hinduism, defending his third dissertation in 1961. Further, even though his pluralistic synthesis was a position far afield from his upbringing in Spain, his pluralism bore the stamp of his original spiritual formation in Opus Dei. Whereas Abhishiktananda sought answers in a transcendent realm, Panikkar sought answers in the realm of differences, for interreligious believers meet "here in this World where we are fellow-pilgrims, where we commune in our

humanness, in the *samsāric* adventure, in our historical situation."⁶⁵ Likewise, the founder of Opus Dei, Josemaría Escrivá, emphasized finding God not in a flight from the world to the monastic cloister, but in the midst of the world, in the midst of one's daily activities.⁶⁶ Hence, both Abhishiktananda and Panikkar, in spite of radical transformations in their lives, bore the imprint of their earlier days in Europe and carried out their original goals in Europe, which were, respectively, the contemplative surrender to the Godhead and the synthesis of diverging worldviews.

Notes

¹ I am grateful to Dominic Bruno for his work as a research assistant, to John Boyle for sharing his knowledge of Opus Dei with me, and to Gerald Schlabach for assisting me with the Spanish sources.

² Abhishiktananda in James Stuart, *Swami Abhishiktananda: His Life Told through His Letters* (Delhi: ISPC, 1989), p.116.

³ Panikkar in *Abhishiktananda & Panikkar*, WorldNews site, video file, 6:15, December 4, 2009 (originally aired on TSI), http://wn.com/Raimon_Panikkar_on_Swami_Abhishiktananda (accessed February 23, 2011).

⁴ Stuart, p.1.

⁵ Ibid. p. 3.

⁶ Ibid. p. 5.

⁷ *A Benedictine Ashram* was originally published as *An Indian Benedictine Ashram* in 1951.

⁸ J. Monchanin and Henri Le Saux, *A Benedictine Ashram*, rev. ed. (Isle of Man: Times Press, 1964), pp. 1, 50.

⁹ Ibid. p. 50.

¹⁰ Ibid. p. 59.

¹¹ Stuart, pp. 8-9

¹² Henri Le Saux, "Amour et Sagesse," Typewritten document. Abhishiktananda Archives, Vidyajyoti College of Theology, Delhi, p. 12.

¹³ Ibid. p. 108. "Nul mot ne peut dire Dieu, toute pensée défaille devant Dieu, toute fruition, toute delectation n'est rien devant la béatitude divine. Au-delà; au-delà toujours. Ce ne sont pas vos dons, Seigneur que je veux, mais vous-même; ce ne sont pas les éblouissements de l'Esprit d'intelligence auxquels j'aspire, mais c'est à votre vision, au face à face avec vous, Seigneur"

¹⁴ Raimundo Panikkar, "Letter to Abhishiktananda on Eastern-Western Monasticism." *Studies in Formative Spirituality* 3 (1982), p. 446; and Stuart, p. 12.

¹⁵ Much of this biographical information is from Fundació Vivarium Raimon Panikkar, "A Multicultural and Multireligious Origin. From Barcelona to Rome, via Bonn, Madrid and Salamanca (1918-1954), <http://raimon-panikkar.org/english/biography-2.html> (accessed March 9, 2011) and Michael J. Walsh, *Opus Dei: An Investigation into the Secret Society Struggling for Power within the Roman Catholic Church*, 1st US ed. (San Francisco: Harper, 1992; 1989), pp. 23-24, 37-38, 133, 169-70.

¹⁶ R. Panikkar, "Faith and Belief: A Multireligious Experience; an Objectified Autobiographical Fragment" *Anglican Theological Review* 53, no. 4 (October 1971), p. 222.

¹⁷ It is tempting to characterize Abhishiktananda as the mystic and Panikkar as the intellectual, but Bettina Bäumer, who knew both men well, warns against this: "Even Abhishiktananda was a theologian, and even Panikkar a mystic." Kala Acharya, Milena Carrara Pavan, and William Parker, eds., *Fullness of Life* (Mumbai: Somaiya Publications, 2008), p. 185.

¹⁸ Andrés Vásquez de Prada, *The Founder of Opus Dei: The Life of St. Josemaria Escriva*. Vol. 1 (New York: Scepter, 2001), p. 258.

¹⁹ Escrivá in *Ibid.* p. 259.

²⁰ Walsh, p. 172.

²¹ Raymond Carr, *Spain, 1808-1975*, Oxford History of Modern Europe, 2nd ed. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1982), p. 764.

²² Vásquez de Prada, pp. 328-329.

²³ Raimundo Paniker, "Vision de Síntesis del Universo." *Arbor* 1 (1944), p. 12.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, pp. 5-7.

²⁵ For good summaries of Panikkar's early work see Gerard Vincent Hall, "Raimon Panikkar's Hermeneutics of Religious Pluralism" (PhD thesis, The Catholic University of America, 1994), pp. 7-85; and John Francis Duggan, "Multireligious Experience and Pluralist Attitude: Raimon Panikkar and His Critics" (PhD thesis, University of St. Michael's College, 2000), pp. 46-80.

²⁶ Duggan, pp. 69-79. The final split between Panikkar and Opus Dei was around 1966 (Walsh, p. 170).

²⁷ Raimundo Panikkar, *Cometas; Fragmentos De Un Diario Espiritual De La Postguerra* (Madrid: Euramérica, 1972), p. 194.

²⁸ Monchanin and Le Saux, p. 27.

²⁹ Raimundo Paniker, review of *Christus und die Religionen der Erde*, by Franz König, *Arbor* 24 (1953), p. 461-463.

³⁰ Abhishiktananda, *The Secret of Arunāchala*. (Delhi: ISPCK, 1979), p. 9.

³¹ Stuart, p. 34.

³² *Ibid.* p. 59. See also pp. 3, 68-69.

³³ Abhishiktānanda, *Ascent to the Depth of the Heart: The Spiritual Diary (1948-1973) of Swami Abhishiktananda (Dom H. Le Saux)*, ed. Raimon Panikkar, trans. David Fleming and James Stuart (Delhi: ISPCK, 1998), pp. 106, 108-109, 115, 130.

³⁴ It was originally published as *Sagesse Hindoue Mystique Chrétienne* in 1965.

³⁵ Panikkar, "Faith and Belief," p. 222.

³⁶ Although *Unknown Christ* was first published in 1964 the foreword is dated 1957; see Panikkar, *The Unknown Christ of Hinduism* (London: Darton, Longman & Todd, 1964), p. xi. Panikkar wrote in 1976 that he had begun to write the ideas in the book "a quarter of a century ago." Panikkar, *The Unknown Christ of Hinduism: Towards an Ecumenical Christophany*, rev. enl. ed. (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis Books, 1981), pp. 10, 20.

³⁷ See especially Panikkar, *Unknown Christ* (1964), pp. 16-17, 23-24.

³⁸ *Ibid.* pp. 115-26.

³⁹ *Ibid.* pp. 126-30.

⁴⁰ For an account see Stuart, pp. 181-85. Abhishiktananda and Panikkar also celebrated Mass in a similar fashion on the top of Arunachala, the mountain at Tiruvannamalai, in 1964; see Stuart, p. 188.

⁴¹ Abhishiktānanda, *Guru and Disciple*, trans. Heather Sandeman (London: SPCK, 1974), p. 174. See similar words by Panikkar illustrating the theme of the "Unknown Christ" on p. 168.

⁴² See Raimon Panikkar, *The Cosmotheandric Experience: Emerging Religious Consciousness* (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis Books, 1993).

⁴³ Panikkar, "Letter to Abhishiktananda," p. 444; and Abhishiktananda, *Guru and Disciple*, pp. 160-64.

⁴⁴ Panikkar, "Faith and Belief," p. 229.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.* p. 230.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.* p. 231.

⁴⁷ For a discussion of the theocentric position see Jacques Dupuis, *Toward a Christian Theology of Religious Pluralism* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1997), pp. 186-89.

⁴⁸ Raimundo Panikkar, "The Meaning of Christ's Name in the Universal Economy of Salvation," in *Evangelization, Dialogue and Development: Selected Papers of the International Theological Conference, Nagpur (India), 1971*. Documenta Missionalia 5, ed. Mariasusai Dhavamony (Rome: Universita Gregoriana, 1972), pp. 216-217.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.* p. 218. See also pp. 215-17. Hall traces the gradual emergence of this position in Panikkar's writings; see Hall, pp. 107-25.

⁵⁰ Abhishiktananda, *Ascent*, p. 62.

⁵¹ Abhishiktananda, *Saccidānanda: A Christian Approach to Advaitic Experience* [Sagesse Hindoue Mystique Chrétienne.]. 1st English ed. (Delhi: ISPCK, 1974), p. 199.

⁵² Arthur Osborne, *Buddhism and Christianity in the Light of Hinduism* (Tiruvannamalai, India: Sri Ramanasramam, 2009), p. 61.

⁵³ Stuart, p. 234. See also pp. 270-71.

⁵⁴ Abhishiktananda, *Ascent*, p. 335. See also p. 333.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.* p. 368. See also Stuart, pp. 320-21.

⁵⁶ Bettina Bäumer, "QUE L'ESPRIT VOUS PERDE DANS LE FOND!: Lettres de Swami Abhishiktananda à Bettina Bäumer de 1963 à 1973", *Dilatato Corde* 1, no. 1 (2011), http://www.dimmid.org/index.asp?Type=B_BASIC&SEC={6B2945FB-2CC4-4EF9-B72F-9C0E815F4A9D} (accessed March 9, 2011). "Je ne crois pas que R. (Pannikar) ait encore trouvé l'implication à son 'demeurer chrétien', même dans son 'Supernum' – au fond je le crois beaucoup plus chrétien (au sens courant) qu'il ne se pense lui-même. **L'expérience de l'Orient conduit à un tel VIDE (votre mot) – PLENITUDE que quoi que ce soit de particulier est incapable de s'infiltrer. Et qu'est le christianisme sans nāmarūpa.**" (I removed the boldface in translating this passage.) See related comments in Stuart, pp. 243, 316, 319.

Although in the 1970s Panikkar was giving greater weight to traditional doctrine than Abhishiktananda, Abhishiktananda had earlier shown greater reluctance than Panikkar to drop this. As Panikkar stated in a 2009 interview, "I didn't suffer his spiritual torment. I had reached a spiritual synthesis and had already solved so many things that were, for him, a problem of conscience or heart. I had suffered a lot in the past, in Spain with my father. I had already acquired great peace of mind. I knew I was not betraying my Christian training. While he felt almost like an adulterer, faced with the dilemma of choosing between Hinduism and Christianity" (in video *Abhishiktananda & Panikkar*). Bäumer wrote that "Panikkar's sharp mind could help Abhishiktananda dissolve many doubts and scruples." Acharya, p. 185. See also Stuart, pp. 178, 209, 242.

⁵⁷ Bäumer wrote that "if there was one important point of divergence, or let us say complementarity, it was that Abhishiktananda time and again stressed the acosmic ideal, as embodied in a radical *sannyāsa*, whereas Panikkar emphasized the cosmic dimension, ultimately integrating it in his cosmotheandric vision." Acharya, pp. 185-86.

⁵⁸ For Abhishiktananda the key thing had become the awakening to the *ātman*, not the specific beliefs of a

religion, not even the "death, sacrifice, redemption, resurrection" of Jesus. Abhishiktananda, *Ascent*, p. 369.

⁵⁹ Panikkar, *Unknown Christ* (1981), p. 24.

⁶⁰ *Ibid.* p. 26.

⁶¹ Raimon Panikkar, "Introduction," in *Ascent to the Depth of the Heart: The Spiritual Diary (1948-1973) of Swami Abhishiktananda (Dom H. Le Saux)*, ed. Raimon Panikkar, trans. David Fleming and James Stuart (Delhi: ISPCK, 1998), p. xviii. See also Raimundo Panikkar, "Category of Growth in Comparative Religion: A Critical Self-Examination" *Harvard Theological Review* 66, no. 1 (January 1973), p. 130-134.

⁶² Raimundo Panikkar, "The Invisible Harmony: A Universal Theory of Religion or a Cosmic Confidence in Reality?," in *Toward a Universal Theology of Religion*, ed. Leonard Swidler (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1987), p. 140-41. See also Raimundo Panikkar, "What Is Comparative Philosophy Comparing?," in *Interpreting across Boundaries: New Essays in Comparative Philosophy*, ed. Gerald James Larson and Eliot Deutsch (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1988), pp. 116-36.

⁶³ Panikkar, "Letter to Abhishiktananda," pp. 444, 446.

⁶⁴ Le Saux, "Amour et Sagesse," p. 108.

⁶⁵ Panikkar, *Unknown Christ* (1981), p. 26.

⁶⁶ Vázquez de Prada, pp. 257-62, 328-29. Panikkar stated about his time in Opus Dei that "I do not repent of that period of my life... life's line is neither straight nor zigzag" Panikkar in Fundació Vivarium.